Hermaphroditus

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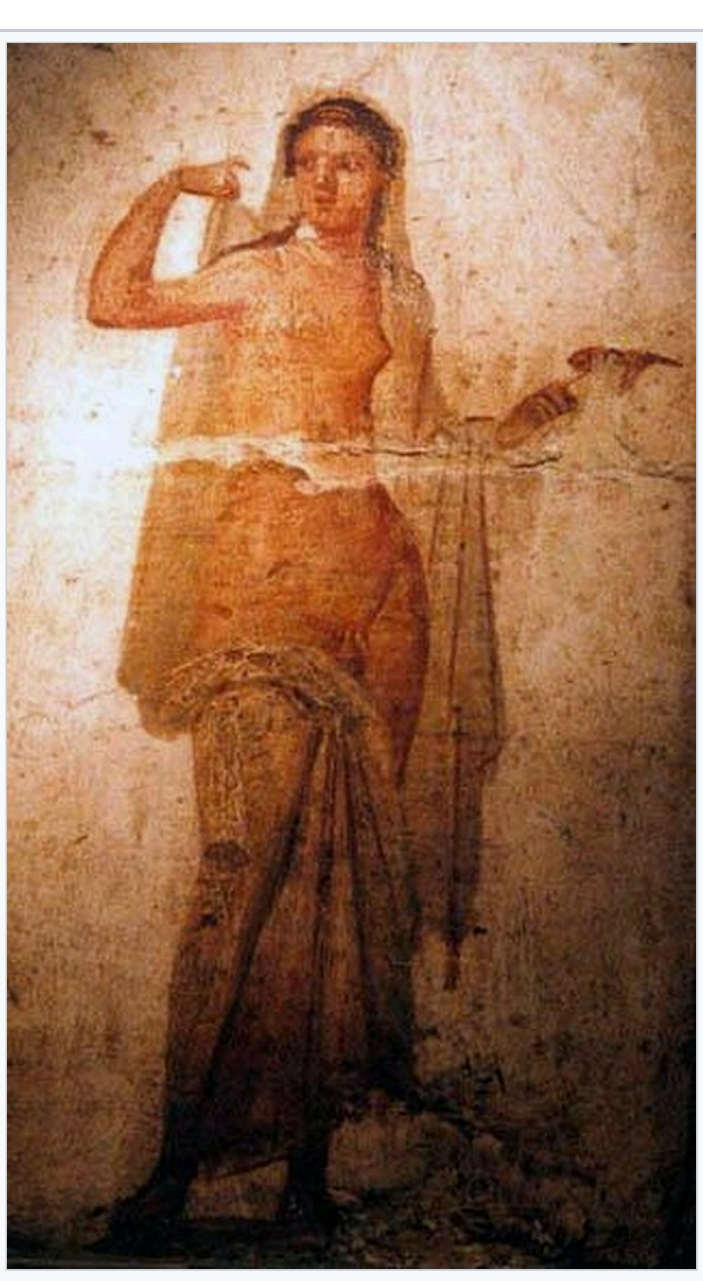
In ancient Greek religion and mythology, **Hermaphroditus** (/hərˌmæfrəˈdaɪtəs/ ; Ancient Greek: Ἑρμαφρόδιτος, [hermapʰródi:tos]) is a child of Aphrodite and Hermes. According to Ovid, he was born a remarkably beautiful boy whom the naiad Salmacis attempted to rape and prayed to be united with forever. A god, in answer to her prayer, merged their two forms into one and transformed him into a being of two sexes, both male and female. His name is compounded of his parents' names, Hermes and Aphrodite,[1] and is the origin of the term *hermaphrodite*.

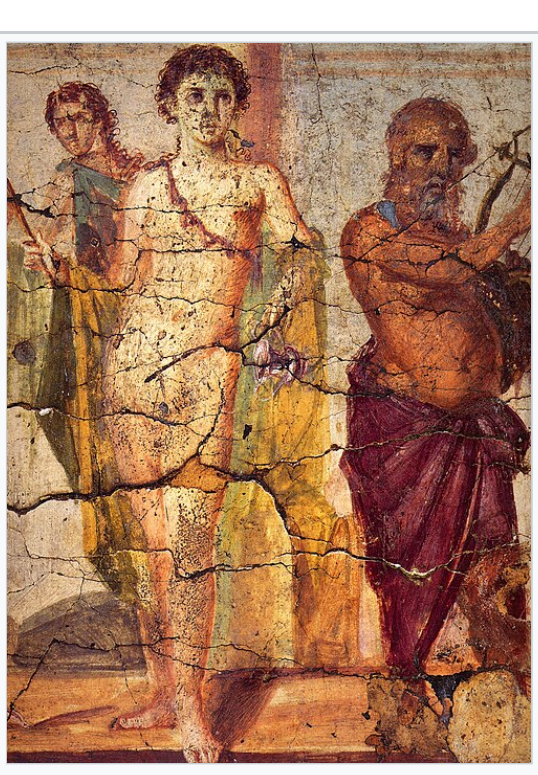

Herculaneum fresco 1–50 AD, National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Because Hermaphroditus was a child of Hermes, and consequently a great-grandchild of Atlas (Hermes's mother Maia was the daughter of Atlas), he is sometimes called Atlantiades (Greek: Ἀτλαντιάδης).[2]

Symbolism [edit]

Hermaphroditus, the two-sexed child of Aphrodite and Hermes (Venus and Mercury), had long been a symbol of androgyny or effeminacy, and was portrayed in Greco-Roman art as a female figure with male genitals.[3]

Theophrastus's account also suggests a link between Hermaphroditus and the institution of marriage. The reference to the fourth day of the month is telling (see Literature section below): this is the luckiest day to have a wedding. Hermaphroditus's association with marriage seems to have been that, by embodying both masculine and feminine qualities, he symbolized the coming together of men and women in sacred union. Another factor linking Hermaphroditus to weddings was his parents' role in protecting and blessing brides.[4][5]


Hermaphroditos, holding a torch and a kantharos, between Silenus (right) and maenad (left); Roman fresco from the triclinium of the procurator in the Casa del Centenario (IX 8,3–6) in Pompeii

Hermaphroditus's name is derived from those of their parents Hermes and Aphrodite. All three of these gods figure largely among erotic and fertility figures, and all possess distinctly sexual overtones. According to Photius, Hermaphroditus is the same divinity as Aphroditus, a version of Aphrodite which is considered male because of its phallic features.

Mythology [edit]

Further information: Salmacis and Salmacis (fountain)

Ovid's account relates that Hermaphroditus was nursed by naiads in the caves of Mount Ida,[6] a sacred mountain in Phrygia (present day Turkey). At the age of fifteen, he grew bored with his surroundings and traveled to the cities of Lycia and Caria. It was in the woods of Caria, near Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum, Turkey) that he encountered the nymph Salmacis, in her pool. She was overcome by lust for the boy, who was very beautiful but still young, and tried to flirt with him, but was rejected. When he thought she had left, Hermaphroditus undressed and entered the waters of the empty pool. Salmacis sprang out from behind a tree and jumped into the pool. She wrapped herself around the youth, forcibly kissing him and touching his breast, attempting to rape him. While he struggled, she called out to the gods that they should never part. Her wish was granted, and their bodies blended into one form, "a creature of both sexes".[7] Hermaphroditus prayed to Hermes and Aphrodite that anyone else who bathed in the pool would be similarly transformed, and his wish was granted.

Hungarian classical philologist Károly Kerényi wrote: "In this form the story was certainly not ancient". He related it to the Greek myths involving male youths (*ephebes*), noting the legends of Narcissus and Hyacinth, who had archaic hero-cults, and also those involving Hymen (Hymenaios).[8]

Diodorus Siculus, in his work *Library of History*, mentions that some say that Hermaphroditus is a god and appears at certain times among men, but there are some who declare that such creatures of two sexes are monstrosities, and coming rarely into the world as they do have the quality of presaging the future, sometimes for evil and sometimes for good.[9]

In a description found on the remains of a wall in Halicarnassus dated to around 2nd century BC, Hermaphroditus' mother, Aphrodite, names Salmacis as the nymph who nursed and took care of an infant Hermaphroditus after being placed in her care, a very different version than the one presented by Ovid.[10]

The satirical author Lucian of Samosata also implies that Hermaphroditus was born like that, rather than becoming later in life against his will, and blames it on the identity of the child's father, Hermes.[11]

Cult and worship [edit]

Main article: Aphroditus

The oldest traces of the cult in Greek countries are found in Cyprus. Here, according to Macrobius (*Saturnalia*, iii. 8), there was a bearded statue of a male Aphrodite, called Aphroditus by Aristophanes. Philochorus in his *Atthis* (ap. Macrobius *loc. cit.*) further identified this divinity, at whose sacrifices men and women exchanged garments, with the Moon.[12][13] A terracotta plaque from the 7th century BC depicting Aphroditos, which was found in Perachora, suggests it was an archaic Greek cult.[14]

Hermaphroditus statue from Pergamum, Hellenistic, 3rd century BC (Istanbul)

The deification and the origins of the cult of Hermaphroditus beings stem from Eastern religions, where the hermaphrodite nature expressed the idea of a primitive being that united both sexes. This double sex also attributed to Dionysus and Priapus – the union in one being of the two principles of generation and conception – denotes extensive fertilizing and productive powers.[12][15]

This Cyprian Aphrodite is the same as the later Hermaphroditos, which simply means Aphroditos in the form of a herma, and first occurs in the *Characters* (16) of Theophrastus.[16] After its introduction at Athens (probably in the 5th century BC), the importance of this deity seems to have declined. It appears no longer as the object of a special cult, but limited to the homage of certain sects, expressed by superstitious rites of obscure significance.[12]

We find in Alciphron that there was at Athens a temple of Hermaphroditus. The passage proposes that he might be considered as the deity who presided over married people; the strict union between husband and wife being aptly represented by a deity, who was male and female inseparably blended together.[17][*clarification needed*]

In the *Greek Anthology*, at the chapter in which describe the statues in the Baths of Zeuxippus, it also mentions and describes a statue of Hermaphroditus.[18]

Literature [edit]

The earliest mention of Hermaphroditus in Greek literature is by the philosopher Theophrastus (3rd century BC), in his book *The Characters*, XVI The Superstitious Man,[19] in which he portrays various types of eccentric people.

> Also on the fourth and seventh days of each month he will order his servants to mull wine, and go out and buy myrtle-wreaths, frankincense, and smilax; and, on coming in, will spend the day in crowning the Hermaphrodites.

Statue of a satyr and Hermaphroditus. Roman copy of the 2nd century CE, after a Hellenistic original of the 2nd century BCE. Antikensammlung Berlin (Altes Museum)

The first mention of Hermes and Aphrodite as Hermaphroditus's parents was by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC) in his book *Bibliotheca historica*, book IV, 4.6.5.

> Hermaphroditus, as he has been called, who was born of Hermes and Aphrodite and received a name which is a combination of those of both his parents. Some say that this Hermaphroditus is a god and appears at certain times among men, and that he is born with a physical body which is a combination of that of a man and that of a woman, in that he has a body which is beautiful and delicate like that of a woman, but has the masculine quality and vigour of a man. But there are some who declare that such creatures of two sexes are monstrosities, and coming rarely into the world as they do they have the quality of presaging the future, sometimes for evil and sometimes for good.[20]

The only full narration of his myth is that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, IV.274–388 (8 AD), where the emphasis is on the feminine snares of the lascivious water-nymph Salmacis and her compromising of Hermaphroditus' erstwhile budding manly strength, detailing his bashfulness and the engrafting of their bodies.[21]

A rendering of the story into an *epyllion*, published anonymously in 1602, was later (1640) attributed by some to Francis Beaumont.[22]

Ausonius, in his *Epigramata de diversis rebus / Epigrams on various matters* (4th century), also tells of Hermaphroditus' parentage and union with the nymph Salmacis.[23]

> On Hermaphroditus and his Nature—By Mercury begotten, conceived by Cythera, Hermaphroditus, compound alike in name and frame, combining either sex, complete in neither, neutral in love, unable to enjoy either passion.
>
> On the Union of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus—The nymph Salmacis grew one with the mate she desired. Ah, happy maid, if she is conscious of a man's embrace. And twice happy thou, O youth, united with a lovely bride, if one being may still be two.

In the *Palatine Anthology*, IX.783 (980 AD), there is a reference to a sculpture of Hermaphroditus which was placed in a bath for both sexes.[24] The passage IX.317 is in dialogue form, based on the dialogue between Hermaphroditus and Silenus. The latter claims that he has had sexual intercourse with Hermaphroditus three times. Hermaphroditus complains and objects to the fact by invoking Hermes in an oath, while Silenus invokes Pan for the reliability of his allegations.[25]

Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem "Hermaphroditus" in *Poems and Ballads* is subscribed *Au Musée du Louvre, Mars 1863*, leaving no doubt that it was the Borghese Hermaphroditus that had inspired his ode.[26]

In art [edit]

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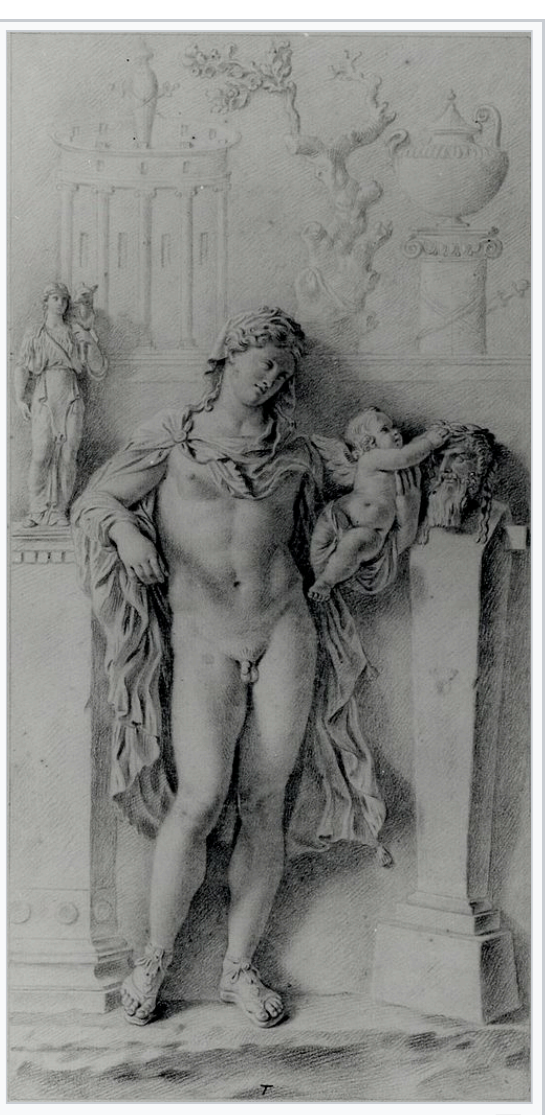
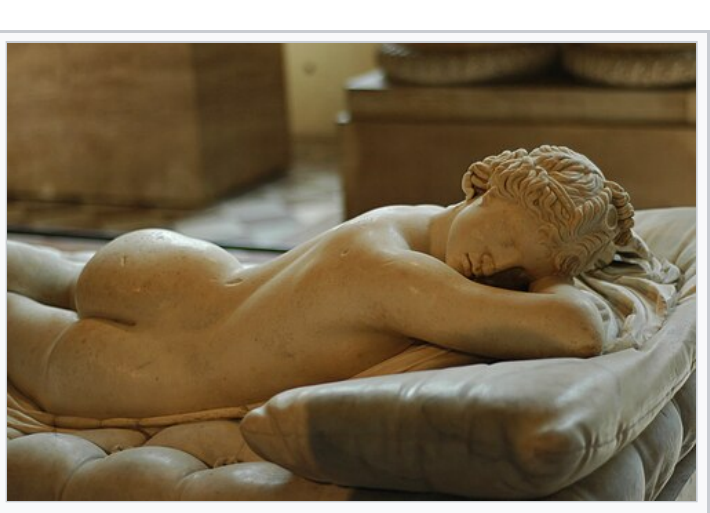
Paintings and engravings [edit]


Drawing of a relief depicting Hermaphroditus and Eros crowning a herm by Antonio Maria Zanetti (c. 1721)

- In Greek vase painting Hermaphroditus was depicted as a winged youth with male and female attributes.[27]
- Roman frescos found at Pompeii and Herculaneum show Hermaphroditus in various styles, alone and interacting with satyrs, Pan and Silenus.[28]
- *The Nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Francois-Joseph Navez, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Bartholomeus Spranger, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Scarsellino, Galleria Borghese, Rome
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Jean François de Troy
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Ludovico Carracci
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Francesco Albani
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Bernard Picart
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Johann Wilhelm Baur
- *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* by Virgil Solis
- *Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* by Louis Finson
- *The Nymph of Salmacis* by Rupert Bunny
- *Hermaphrodite Among Roses* by Aubrey Beardsley
- *Hermaphrodite Figure* by Jacopo Pontormo
- *The Metamorphosis of Hermaphrodite and Salmacis* by Jan Gossaert (Jan Mabuse)
- *Salmacis et Hermaphrodite* by Jean Daullé


Borghese Hermaphroditus, Roman copy of the 2nd century AD (Louvre)

Sculpture [edit]

- The most famous sculpture of this figure is the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*.[29]
- *Hermaphroditus*, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille
- A life-size sculpture of Hermaphroditus from Pergamon is one of the largest found, standing 186.5 centimetres (73.4 in) tall, at the İstanbul Archaeology Museums.[30]
- A statue by John Henry Foley was shown at the 1851 Great Exhibition and later donated to the Bancroft Gardens, Stratford-upon-Avon, where it now stands.[31]
- A marble statue of Hermaphroditus was found near the south end of the Garden of the House of Loreius Tiburtinus. II.2.2. Room 13.[*citation needed*][32]

See also [edit]

- Intersex in history

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3. ^ Antonio Beccadelli (Eugene Michael O'Connor, tr., ed.) *Hermaphroditus*: Introduction.
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6. ^ Ovid Alcithoë tells the story of Salmacis in *Metamorphoses* Book IV, lines 274–316
7. ^ Ovid Salmacis and Hermaphroditus merge in Metamorphoses Book IV, lines 346–388
8. ^ Kerenyi, p. 172-3.
9. ^ Diodorus Siculus, Library of History 4. 6. 5
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11. ^ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods* Apollo and Dionysus
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18. ^ Greek Anthology, 2.1
19. ^ an eudæmonist: The Characters of Theophrastus
20. ^ Diodorus Siculus, Library of History Book IV 4.6.5 (translated by Charles Henry Oldfather) at Theoi.com
21. ^ Garth, Sir Samuel Translation of Metamorphoses IV at Wikisource
22. ^ Salmacis and Hermaphroditus 1602 text, accessed in Renascence Editions at University of Oregon
23. ^ Ausonius, Epigrams on Various Matters, CII—CIII
24. ^ *The Greek Anthology* IX.783
25. ^ *The Greek Anthology* IX.317
26. ^ Swinburne A C Hermaphroditus Library Electronic Text Resource Service (LETRS) / Digital Library Program, Indiana University
27. ^ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 3. 21–23 (trans. Rackham): "Engendered from the sea-foam, we are told she [Aphrodite] became the mother by Mercurius [Hermes] of the second Cupidus [literally Eros, but Cicero is probably referring to Hermaphroditos]"
28. ^ Greek and Hellenistic Lovemaking, Embodying Male and Female Sexuality: Hermaphroditus p. 54
29. ^ McDermon, Daniel (2016-06-24). "What the Sleeping Hermaphrodite Tells Us About Art, Sex and Good Taste". *The New York Times*. ISSN 0362-4331. Retrieved 2025-03-16.
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32. ^ DeMone, Brittany; Hughes, Lisa A. (Summer 2021). "Sensing Hermaphroditus in the Dionysian Theatre Garden" (PDF). *Open Arts Journal* (10): 71. doi:10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2021s04. ISSN 2050-3679 – via Google Scholar.

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External links [edit]

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- The Warburg Institute Iconographic Database (images of Hermaphroditus)

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